

From the Ground Up by kidneys4karev

Series: [If I could do it all again, I would \[1\]](#)

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Summary:

She began her new life standing up, surrounded by cold darkness and stale, dusty air.

[the maze runner / stranger things AU]
platonic will byers & max mayfield centric

1. Chapter 1

Author's Note:

This idea have been sitting in my drafts for God knows how long. It was first created with the help of my good friend Rhi, and I instantly fell in love with it. You can find the soundtrack for it on spotify, titled 'From the Ground Up'.

TW - this story will include themes of suicide and panic attacks, so read at your own risk. However, I will put a warning in the notes before said chapters, as always.

If you're wondering, Will and Max will NEVER end up together. This fic is focused on their friendship, something I know Rhi and I cannot get enough of, and that will be it. There won't be much focus on romance in this fic, but I might include some in the second one.

I hope you enjoy!

She began her new life standing up, surrounded by cold darkness and stale, dusty air.

The platform beneath her jolted upwards, sending her lurching to the left, crashing harshly against the metal fencing. Her fingers curled around the edge, desperately trying to stay upright. Wherever she was, whatever kind of makeshift elevator she was in, she did know one thing.

She was going up.

After what seemed like hours, but in reality was barely a couple of minutes, the room grinded to a halt, metal on metal screaming. She

stayed where she was, breathing heavily, frozen in place.

Then a light came on.

Below her, on the ground, were ten or so bodies, curled up on the ground- whether they were sleeping or dead, the girl didn't want to find out. She didn't know who they were, couldn't put names to faces, despite the nagging feeling that she'd met them all before. Whoever they were, and however she knew them, she couldn't remember.

In fact, she couldn't remember anything.

The one thing that stuck out was a name- Maxine. Was it hers? Her name? It felt familiar, but so distant, as though it didn't quite belong to her.

Surrounding her, were four walls of chain-link fencing, a layer of stone behind it. This wasn't a room, or an elevator- this was a cage.

And the cage was opening.

The ceiling seemed to push apart, mechanical gears clicking as it slid open. Light streamed in- bright sunlight, replacing the artificial glow of the single bulb in the corner. Looking up, lifting a hand to shield her eyes, she deemed the wall too tall, far taller than her. She'd never climb out alone

A shuffling sound came from behind her, and she turned fast enough to make herself dizzy, finding a boy around the age of 13. He sat up, confusion and a little fear lacing his features.

“You alright?” The girl asked, watching the boy cautiously as he pulled himself to his feet. She trusted him, really, vague recognition trying to cloud her judgement. The boy nodded, joining her by the wall, carefully navigating the maze of bodies on his way over, looking above at the bright blue sky, just as puzzled as she was.

“Let’s get out of here,” she continued, holding two hands out to lift him out. He shook his head, mimicking her, motioning for her to climb out with his help.

“You look stronger than me- you can pull me out,” he argued, clearly better at thinking ahead than she was. She nodded, a foot on his hand, before pushing up, gripping onto the top of the box.

She flung her legs over, moving to kneel beside the edge, hands lowered for him to grab. He clutched them tightly, letting himself be pulled up to the top, sitting beside her.

Just as she thought things couldn’t get any stranger, her surroundings hit her at full force. Around her, stood four, towering walls, made of stone and covered in thick vines of ivy. The rest was greenery- grass, trees, a lake, and a couple of wooden features, something resembling a hut and a barn.

Their new home gave cage a whole new meaning.

“What is this place?” The boy asked from behind her, sounding both shocked and scared. The other girl shook her head slowly, eyes trained upwards on the top of the walls.

“I don’t know.”

“Do you think those people in there are dead?” Will’s harsh question barely startled Max, who was honestly numb to the absurdity of the day she was having. Glancing back at the box for reference, she shook her head.

“No. They’re probably just unconscious. Why would they send two living kids and some dead bodies to.. Wherever we are.” Will only nodded, letting the question lingering on their lips go by unsaid- why would someone send two kids to this place anyway?

They lapsed into silence for a few moments, before the girl turned. “My name’s Max,” she supplied, the name slipping off of her tongue. Where the shortening came from, she didn’t know, but it felt right, a lot more familiar than Maxine did, anyway.

“I’m Will,” the boy replied.

“I know.”

Will did a double take, staring at her with wide eyes and an agape mouth. “You remember? I mean- what?” He seemed just as surprised as she was to have known that, clearly experiencing the same amnesia.

"I don't remember you. But... I don't know." She sat down on a fallen tree branch, arms resting on her knees. "I just feel like I know you. It's like I know things, but I don't. Trust me- I don't even know what I look like."

Will nodded slowly, taking in the explanation. However absurd it sounded, it seemed to resemble what he was feeling, as he didn't feel the need to argue. Then again, Max wouldn't have dubbed him as the arguing type. "You've got red hair and blue eyes- *really* blue eyes," he started, eyes scanning her face. "You look really short and you're covered in freckles."

Max made an offended noise, jumping to her feet. "Stand up," she ordered, making a beckoning motion with her hand, despite having just sat down. He did as she was told, and she stood close to him, a hand on her head. She moved said hand forward until it hit the stop of Will's head, comparing their heights.

"I'm not short- we're the *same* height!" She protested, crossing her arms. Will raised an eyebrow at her.

"I never said I wasn't short too," he pointed out, sitting back down on the log, "I was just saying that you were."

"Whatever," Max huffed, flopping down beside him, facing him again, doing the same. "You have dark brown eyes and brown hair- and a *really* bad haircut. I mean, that doesn't suit you at *all*."

"What's wrong with my hair?" He exclaimed indignantly. Max raised an eyebrow at him.

“You look like the hairdresser used a bowl as a template,” she said- Will shoved her lightly, smile on his lips.

Yeah, Max concluded, whoever they were before, they definitely knew each other.

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It was late evening when the others had woken up and joined them, finding their way out of the box and into their new, walled off home. Some of them were in shock, wandering around in some form of dissociated state, leaving those of them most unaffected to hold their own meeting.

The group consisted of Max, Will, and a few of the older kids. The oldest, Steve, they'd deemed to be around 18, the other three a year or so younger. There was Nancy, one of the three girls, that had come up, Max and Barb making up the other two, Jonathan, a quiet boy who didn't have much to say, and Billy, who for some reason, despised Max with his entire being.

In the short amount of time they'd been there, they'd taken inventory of the place. The cage elevator- that the group had started calling 'The Box'- had come with various crates of seeds, material, and some tools. The worst part of their findings was that it was all survival gear, intending for them to be self-sufficient. That definitely pointed against them getting out of there anytime soon, but on the bright side, at least they wouldn't die instantly either.

The crates themselves were something suspicious. They were wooden, nothing out of the ordinary at a first glance, until you saw the letters 'W.I.C.K.E.D' printed on the sides of them. None of them had managed to remember what it meant, or figure out what it stood for. Some people, Billy, in particular, had argued that it was a warning, that they needed to get out and not trust the things that had been put in there with them. Max disagreed.

"Shouldn't we focus on... I don't know, survival? Rather than getting out?" Max suggested. Billy scoffed harshly.

"So you want to stay here?" He accused, narrowing his eyes at her.

"No! No, I just think-"

He cut her off immediately, glaring daggers at her. "Good. If you don't have anything helpful to say, you might as well fuck off and wander round with the other airheads."

Max glared back, the only thing holding her back from ripping his head off was Will's hand on hers, grounding her to the present. God, was she glad that he was there- she didn't need to be labelled as a murderer on their first day.

"Max is right," Steve spoke up eventually, having taken on the role of the leader, "we can't find a way out if we're dying of hunger. Shelter looks like it's taken care of, but we need food and water."

“There’s a barn,” Will spoke up, “there’s animals in there- and we can try growing food? We got seeds in the crates. And there’s the lake for water, we just need to figure out how to filter it.”

“Growing food? Why’re you talking like there’s no way out already?” Billy challenged- Will quietened, less argumentative than Max was. Against her better judgment, Max answered for him.

“We looked. We looked *everywhere* . The ivy doesn’t go to the top, and the wall doesn’t have any gaps. There’s weaknesses, almost like doors on each side, but they don’t move, and it didn’t do anything when we tried carving more out with a rock. We’re trapped here- might as well try not to die while we’re at it.”

Billy shook his head, rising to his feet and stalking off, muttering to himself about finding his *own fucking way out* . Steve just sighed, exasperated.

“Tomorrow we sort things out. We need food, water, jobs, all things like that. Anyone who doesn’t comply... well, we’ll deal with that when it comes down to it,” Steve concluded.

“Why tomorrow? Shouldn’t we start now? Why are we wasting time?” Max questioned, clearly anxious about the situation, despite how much she tried to hide it. There was only so much emotion a thirteen year old could hide.

“Give everyone the night to grieve,” Steve said, sympathetic but uncompromising.

No one argued with him.

2. Chapter 2

It took two days for the walls to open.

They tried to sort out a routine, but it pretty much consisted of wake up, eat, sleep. No one seemed to want to contribute to the farming or the cooking or any of the jobs, and Steve didn't have the heart to make them. Most of them were in shock, and with the addition of around ten more people to their new home, everyone was too dazed to figure out how to pull it together. That, in itself, infuriated Max to no end. She just couldn't understand why everyone was so useless when they needed to work out how to survive.

They'd deemed Steve their unofficial leader, with Billy as his second-in-command. Max wasn't exactly happy about that, due to how much he seemed to despise her, but at least he wasn't in total control of the place. Besides, despite naming a leader, they hadn't exactly needed one.

That was, until today.

They woke up with the sunrise, hours earlier than the normal, to the sound of grinding gears and various mechanical clicks. The stone retracted into itself, leaving large openings on all four sides of the place they'd dubbed *The Glade*. As it seemed, their cage was no longer just that.

It had a way out.

One by one, against Steve's command to wait, stay put and figure out a plan, the Glade inhabitants filed along the stone corridor. Max, of course, was at the very front of this group, Will right by her side, as he had been during the two days of this ordeal.

When they turned two more identical corners, it soon became very apparent that this was a maze.

"Stick together?" Max proposed to Will, who had no protests about this plan- this was the most responsible Max had been in the few days he'd known her. Well, remembered knowing her- they were both sure that they'd been friends before, wherever and whenever that was.

"Always," Will replied, sticking to the left wall, with Steve's shouting of 'be back before dark' fading into the distance.

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They found a whole lot of nothing.

Max wanted to go further, as expected, but Will pointed out the rapidly setting sun, forcing them to turn on themselves. On their walk back, Max suggested that they run the next day, pushing themselves further to see if they could find an exit, and Will had obliged. This was the most excited she'd looked in a while, and he wasn't going to ruin it by saying no, nor let her go alone. If he did, he was sure she wouldn't come back, by either getting lost or staying out until past dark and managing to freeze to death. The harsh, towering maze walls made the temperature drop drastically, and he had no doubt

that being so far out in those temperatures wasn't going to be a pleasing experience.

It was dark when they returned, and the twenty or so glade inhabitants were gathered by Steve, some standing, some sitting, clearly uninterested and unwilling to be there. Steve heaved a sigh of relief at the sight of them, hands on his hips in a stance that very much resembled a mother.

"I said be back before dark!" He exclaimed, shooing them to the side. Max rolled her eyes at him,

"Relax- we're back, aren't we? No harm done," she raised her hands in mock surrender, taking in the crowd of people. Almost all of them were there, apart from one of the boys around her age, Ben. Steve was probably going to kill him when he got back, partially because of the lateness, defiance of orders, but mostly due to the fact that he didn't like Ben. Max got off easy- she was the favourite and she knew it- but Ben never pulled his weight and did nothing but shove Will around. Honestly, Max was looking forward to the shouting match that she hoped was about to occur.

The same screeching of moving stone echoed through The Glade, startling the group, a flock of frantic birds flying overhead. Steve ran ahead, followed by a couple of others, Max and Will included. However, it was clear what was happening by the time they reached the West wall.

The walls were closing, and Ben was still inside.

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No one slept well that night.

The walls opened again in the morning, and Max had a gnawing suspicion that this would be their new routine. Steve rushed over, Max following suite, Will close behind, the two never quite able to resist their curiosity, and rarely seen apart. The day Max went anywhere without Will by her side would be the day the world ended.

To everyone's- even Max's- dismay, Ben was nowhere to be seen. A sinking feeling in her stomach, Max lurched forwards, intending to go out and look for him, only stopped by Steve throwing an arm out.

"I'll go," he said, his voice low, waiting until he was sure that Max wasn't going to make a run for it. Eventually, he dropped his arm, making his way slowly to the end of the corridor. He crouched down, lifting an object all too visible from outside of the maze- Ben's bloodied shoe.

Everyone pretended not to notice when James threw up into a nearby bush.

Steve dropped the shoe, rejoining the group with a frown on his face, clearly worried about something else, and not just a dead child.

"What?" Jonathan pressed, trying not to sound as shaky as he felt.

Steve shook his head.

“The maze has changed.”

Everyone stared at Steve, lapsing into a dumbfounded silence. That was, until Mike voiced what everyone was thinking, but too scared to ask. Besides, they all knew the answer he was going to get.

“How is that possible?” He asked, glancing between Steve and the aforementioned maze.

“I’ve got no idea, kid,” Steve replied honestly, “no fucking clue. All I know is that there were paths left and right yesterday. There’s only a right one today.”

“We have to go back out there then!” Max protested, already starting back towards the maze. Steve stopped her in her tracks, shaking his head at her. His expression was one that clearly showed he wasn't up for any arguments.

“No- No one is going back out there today, not until we have a plan. We can’t afford to lose more people. Does everyone understand?” He surveyed the group, receiving a handful of nods and solemn ‘I understand’s.

All eyes fell on Max, who, stubborn as ever, had yet to agree. She glanced between Steve and Will, finally relenting when the latter gave her a look.

“Fine.”

Steve dragged a hand across his face, nodding. “Good, that.”

3. Chapter 3

It took them almost six months to get the place running smoothly, and by that time, they had plenty of people to help out. The box, it seemed, had fallen into a routine- one new person a month, with supplies coming up weekly.

In the early weeks, they'd done as Billy said, trying desperately to leave the confines of the Maze walls. They sent Steve and Nancy up the walls from both the inside and the outside of the Glade, trying to see if they could climb to the top. However, without fail, they both stopped halfway up, descending the walls with a shake of their heads. Whatever was stopping them, no one questioned it- everyone trusted the pair, they took Steve and Nancy's word for it.

When that failed, they thought that the box could've been the key to their escape. After all, the thing took people up into the Glade- what was to say that it couldn't bring them back down?

The first time they tried it, they left Mike in the box for a day, bringing him food and water every few hours. It sounded like a logical idea at first, until it hadn't gone back down 24 hours later and they'd had to lift him back out.

Their second attempt had been to lower someone down on a rope when the box had already gone. To the people at the top, the drop down the elevator shaft seemed like nothing but an endless void, but then again, so had the maze. A girl named Tina had been their volunteer, a rope tied tightly around her waist, Steve and Billy holding it at the top whilst she abseiled down.

For a quiet, deafening moment, they thought they'd been onto something, the girl descending further and further down the pit. Everyone held their breath, waiting on good news, rather than disappointment.

They hadn't expected bad news though, either.

The whirring of a saw bounced up the walls, the sound startling the group above. As if on cue, Steve and Billy staggered backwards, as though Tina had suddenly let go of the rope and her lack of weight had thrown them off.

It was only when they pulled up the top half of her body and a bloodied rope that they decided that the box wasn't the way out after all.

That month, said box brought up a girl named Heather, an older girl with brown hair and the prettiest eyes. Not that Max had noticed that, obviously.

Heather proved to be a pretty good medic, and just like them, remembered nothing but her name. Billy had taken a special liking to her, which Max could hardly complain about- his infatuation with Heather meant that he left her alone. He didn't have as much time to bully her when he was trying to impress the girl tucked away in the med-hut all day.

They'd all had to try their hand at various tasks before being assigned to one. These consisted of building, cooking, killing, gardening, and various other jobs they deemed necessary. Steve, of course, was first-

in-command, deciding to keep Billy as his second, much to Max's and Billy's dismay. She knew he'd have much preferred to be first, and resented Steve for taking the title. As for Max, she just resented the idea of him being in charge of her, despite how busy he was.

A couple people weren't particularly good at anything- Mike, for example, had landed himself a role equivalent to a cleaner, due to his extreme lack of talent in all the fields they'd tried. Max, Lucas and Dustin had found his blatant incompetence hilarious, whilst Will tried (and failed, through his suppressed giggles) to defend him. The group had grown incredibly close throughout their short time in The Glade, that was no secret.

Max was deemed the only other person, besides Heather, even partially capable of taking up the job of a medic. That fact became very clear when Dustin had attempted to practise cleaning a cut Steve had obtained and accidentally made it a whole lot worse. Heather, being busy, had left Max to deal with the aftermath, which she did so with practised ease.

Max, however, very clearly had other ideas.

"Come on Steve- please? I'm the fastest one here! This is bullshit!" She exclaimed, crossing her arms defiantly. Steve sighed, pinching the bridge of his nose in exasperation. Max's mere presence seemed to be ageing him ten times faster.

"I'm not letting you out into the maze, Max, you're too young," he answered, shaking his head. "The answer's still no. Just like it was yesterday."

She'd been pestering him for days about joining the group of runners they were going to be sending out into the unknown. The group consisted of around five older kids, plus Lucas, who'd been deemed fast enough to tag along. Max wasn't happy about that fact at all.

"Lucas is going," she argued, "and he's the same age as me! You just don't think I'm responsible enough."

"You're right," Steve replied, looking down at her, "I don't think you're responsible enough. I *know* you, Max, you'll go too far and forget to come back in time. I'm sorry."

"I can go with her," Will piped up, approaching the two, both of them unaware that he'd been listening. "I'll make sure we're back in time." Max flung her arm out to point at him, defiant, showing no signs of backing down anytime soon. Max was difficult to argue with alone, but when Will was backing her up, even Steve stood no chance.

Steve looked between the two of them, clearly running out of arguments. Max crossed her fingers behind her back, waiting impatiently for the answer, still a child at heart. She wasn't usually one for superstition, but she'd also never wanted something as much as this. If she didn't get to leave, to move, she might genuinely lose her mind before they could get out.

Steve visibly resented, his defeat written all across his face. "Fine. But only if you go with her," he said slowly, giving them both a mildly threatening look.

Max, who ignored the look completely, grinned, turning to Will for an excited high-five. He indulged her, a smile on his face. Sure, running wasn't necessarily his thing, and he would've been perfectly content to stay in the confines of The Glade, but the look on Max's face said it all.

Ignoring Steve's mumbling about the 'little shits being the death of him', Max dragged Will by the arm to the storage unit, excitedly going to pick out tomorrow's supplies.

4. Chapter 4

Notes for the Chapter:

TW - death, blood, mentions of a panic attack but no detail

Max and Will's run that day was the first of many, and they quickly fell into a routine. Eat, run, eat in the maze, run, go back, map, eat, sleep- Max found solace in the daily hum of her new life, however repetitive it may have been. At least the walls changed every night, and she wasn't sat around on her ass doing nothing all day.

Every evening, the runners mapped the maze on parchment sent up with the weekly supplies in the box. It changed every night, and they had yet to find any form of pattern or repetition. Max, however, wasn't giving up- she enjoyed the running, the illusion of freedom that the maze gave her, despite the knowledge that she was trapped there. Will, she wasn't so sure about- he didn't talk much about how he felt about the situation, and Max never pressed.

Maybe she should've, should've asked him if he was okay, with the running and in general. He wasn't telling her everything, that much she knew, but she didn't want to risk their friendship. Looking back, she couldn't help but wish she had pushed harder for answers.

They had some dark days.

Even after they'd established their routine, things had gone horrible wrong. People who didn't agree with the way things were run, scared, angry, confused people, trapped in a situation with no way out and little hope. People who wanted power, and those who feared it- an uprising.

Ten people were lost that month, a short amount in hindsight, a large number compared to how many they were at the end of it, an even bigger number when you took into account who these people were.

Children. That month, they lost ten children.

Steve had restored order, somehow, God knows how. They'd implemented a banishment system, scaring people into obeying the rules, rather than his positive reinforcement idea. Of course, sending people to their death was mostly on Billy's part, but Steve hadn't argued with him on it for very long. They'd all lost too much to risk losing any more.

Nothing changed for another few months, besides the emergence of their new routine. The day seemed to be going smoothly, a boy named Troy coming up in the box the morning prior, who Max instantly disliked. The first thing he did was shove Dustin to the ground, and, well, Max was a little too protective of her friends. If it hadn't been for the new rules against violence, she would've done much worse to the boy than shove him into the dirt.

But everything changed that afternoon. When Max and Will returned, there were screams coming from the infirmary, from a very familiar voice.

"It stung me!" Tommy's hysterical voice tore through the Glade, alerting the two runners instantly. Before Will could even try to stop her (which she very much doubted he would, curious in his own right), Max was halfway across towards the med-hut.

She pushed open the door, gentle as to not alert the people inside of her presence. She peered around the side, Will joining her moments after, the two watching the scene unfold in mild horror.

“What stung you?” Steve asked desperately, struggling to hold him down, even with Billy’s help. “Tommy, you need to tell us what stung you.”

The boy in question just continued to shout, nonsensical, animalistic sounds rising from his throat, and all the younger two could do was stare in horror. Steve gave Billy a helpless look- neither of them knew what to do.

“I found it,” Nancy called from behind them, shoving past Max and Will as she ran into the infirmary, a syringe of bright blue liquid clutched in her hand. Along the side, the word ‘serum’ was printed, below the all too familiar W.I.C.K.E.D logo.

“Hold on- that might kill him,” Steve protested rapidly, hand reaching out to grab Nancy by the wrist, stopping her from continuing. She was just as quick a thinker as Steve, and was already getting ready to inject it into Tommy. For a moment, the three stood still, uncertainty hanging on the air, until-

“He’s already dying,” Billy pointed out, harsher than intended, though he wasn’t wrong. The boy was screaming, a combination of pain and hysteria, veins black and bulging. “Just fucking do it!”

Nancy looked at Steve for reassurance, who just nodded, relenting. "Do it."

Steve's confirmation was all that Nancy needed before stabbing the syringe into Tommy's thigh, pressing the plunger until all the liquid had drained from it. On an ideal day, she would've prepped the injection site, aspirated to make sure she hadn't hit a vein, but his frantic movement made it difficult to even hit part of his body, let alone a specific spot.

Despite the risk, Tommy stopped struggling instantly, the three others in the room stepping back, giving him space. For a moment, nothing happened.

"We should go," Will muttered, making no effort to do such a thing. Max didn't bother to reply, watching intensely, waiting, unable to tear her eyes away.

Without a warning, Tommy was on his feet, his face contorting in pain. "Grievors! They'll fucking kill us all!" He groaned, a hand pressed against the side of his head.

"Tommy- what are you talking about?" Steve started to ask, glancing nervously between the other two. Grievors- the name sounded awfully familiar, but none of them could quite place it, similarly to the majority of their memories.

There was a brief moment of silence, the calm before the storm, before a roar tore from Tommy's mouth. The boy lunged forwards, latching onto Steve, knocking him flat off of his feet. Curled hands

clawed at the other boy, drawing blood down his face and arms, relentlessly attacking like a starving, previously caged lion.

Steve cried out for help, trying desperately to fight him off, but nothing was working. Any shred of humanity that Tommy might've had was replaced with pure, animalistic instinct, and he was far too strong for Steve to throw off.

"Move!" Nancy yelled, pushing Billy back a couple steps. Without hesitating, she threw her makeshift knife across the room, which she'd always had a scary level of accuracy with. It embedded itself in Tommy's neck with a sick *thwack*, his screams turning to a struggling, gurgling noise. He fell to the side, Steve scrambling to his feet from underneath him, blood dripping down his face.

The dirt under Tommy's body darkened with blood, and his choking sounds soon quieted.

Too focused on the dying- well, dead- boy in front of them, Max and Will hadn't noticed Billy turning around. He fixed them with a glare, having been unaware of their presence for the entire ordeal, and now caught off guard.

"What are you doing here? Go!" He barked, his features cold and uncompromising. Max was frozen in place, only leaving when Will dragged her out- *when had he grabbed her hand?* - and over to a quiet corner of the glade, sheltered within the safety of the trees, away from prying eyes.

Max slumped down on a log, the same one they'd sat on when they

met, deathly pale and uncharacteristically quiet, much different to her demeanour on that first day. Will let a couple seconds pass in silence, before speaking up.

“Max?” He asked cautiously, concerned eyes meeting her frantic ones.

He then spent half an hour calming her down from a panic attack and later cried into her shoulder.

5. Chapter 5

Notes for the Chapter:

TW - attempted suicide, injury, mentions of a panic attack

A year later, they concluded that they were well and truly stuck.

They found that the maps repeated every month, no significance to the pattern, and no apparent way out. Max and Will picked up on it first, reluctantly showing their findings to Steve and Billy. The general consensus was that they'd continue as normal, and wouldn't let this get out to the others, not even the runners. They didn't need anyone panicking and losing hope. Not now.

Will, it seemed, didn't get the memo.

Three mornings later, Max woke up groggily to a kiss on the forehead and a whispered 'I love you'. Distantly, she recognised it as Will, mumbling back a weak 'love you too'.

She watched sleepily as he made his way into the maze, and Max, tired as she was, thought nothing of it when she closed her eyes. Will was just going on his run, like he normally did in the morning, like they both did...

Without her?

She sat up in the hammock, frowning slightly. It was early- far too early. ‘Sun has barely come up’ early. A sinking feeling in her stomach, she got up, unaware of how much time had passed since he’d left, not wasting time with her shoes as she jogged to the West wall. She followed him in, sticking left, like they normally did, hoping he hadn’t chosen today of all days to switch his route up.

She jogged still, the soles of her feet burning. Running on stones with nothing on her feet wasn’t exactly her smartest idea, but she couldn’t wait. Something was wrong, she just knew it.

Her suspicions were confirmed when she found Will, curled up at the base of one of the walls, his left leg in an awkward position. “Will?” she called, running over, dropping to her knees beside him, ignoring the pain exploding through them. Whatever she felt, the boy in front of her was no doubt feeling it tenfold. “Will?!”

He barely moved, mumbling under his breath, having onto consciousness. Max swore under her breath, looking at the injury in mild shock. “Shit, Will, what did you do?”

“I’m sorry,” he muttered- Max’s heart dropped. Had he done this himself? No. No, Will would never.. Would he?

She pushed the thought out of her head, needing to focus on Will. “I’m going to reset your leg, okay?” She said shakily hands steadied on either side of his leg. “It’s gonna hurt like a bitch. Think you can handle it?”

Upon receiving no reply, she nodded, psyching herself up. “One,” she

mumbled, “Two. Three.”

The bone crunched, Will screamed, and it took everything in Max not to throw up then and there. “I know. I know,” she said softly, hands moving to his back, helping him up into a sitting position. “It’s not going to hurt for much longer- I need you to stand, okay? We need to get you out.”

“Just leave me here,” he whined, scrunching his face up in agony, resisting her help. Max shook her head, blinking back tears, but not willing to take anymore of his bullshit.

“Come on. Up.” She dragged him to his feet, trying to block out his cries of pain by replaying her plan to get him to hell out. She slung his arm around her, letting him put his weight on her, stepping forward. “We can go as slow as you need, but you’re going to need to walk with me, alright?”

Will nodded mutely, whimpering with every step. Max kept talking, repeating the same phrases, not quite sure of which one of them she was reassuring. Really, it was to keep herself sane.

When they got back to the glade, Max called out for Steve immediately, who took note of the panic in her voice and instantly came running. “What the hell happened here?” He asked, taking in the sight before him. Will hanging on the edge of consciousness, leaning on Max, who he was pretty sure was about to cry, an unseen occurrence. The girl shook her head.

“He broke his leg. Please just- can you carry him?” She asked,

sounding as exhausted as she looked. It'd taken her a while to carry him back, and Will had grown a lot taller in the years they'd been there, surpassing her by a landslide. Steve nodded, picking Will up bridal style, carrying him over to the infirmary, Max following suite.

"Max?" Steve asked again, once he'd set Will down, letting Heather look him over. "What happened?"

Max hesitated. "He... We were in the maze. He thought he saw something so he climbed up the ivy and he slipped and fell. I reset his leg," she lied, making things up on the spot. She was loyal to Will, before everything else, and couldn't risk the others finding out. She just couldn't do that to him, not if he wasn't ready for it, no matter how much she wanted to.

"Without shoes on?" He asked, reasonably skeptical. Max glanced down at her feet, having tracked blood over the entrance, without even noticing it, then back up at Steve. She shook her head helplessly, breathing shakily- thankfully, he seemed to get the message.

"Okay. Alright." He pulled her in for a hug, wrapping his arms around her tightly. Instantly, Max broke down into tears, her shoulders shaking. "It's okay. It's okay."

She nodded in agreement, trying to convince herself of the same thing, but to no avail. Will, her best friend, had just tried to leave her. But worst of all, he'd tried to leave and she hadn't even noticed anything was wrong.

Eventually, Max pulled away, wiping her tears away quickly, embarrassment setting in. "Sorry," she mumbled pathetically, pointedly looking away.

"It's okay, kid," Steve replied, "but we're talking about this later, okay?"

"Okay," she whispered, her eyes finding Will again, who'd now passed out completely.

"The kid gonna be okay?" Steve asked, concern lacing his features- Heather sighed, nodding slowly.

"He'll live- just have to be careful that it doesn't get infected. I'm not sure if it'll heal properly, but we'll just have to wait and see," she explained.

"Right. Right. Okay, I'm going to tell the mob outside some lie to get them to back off. Mike and that lot are going to be losing their shit," Steve pinched the bridge of his nose, "can you bandage Max's feet or something? The idiot went running barefoot."

Max began to protest, but stopped instantly when Steve gave her his signature 'shut up and do what I tell you' look. On any other day, she would fight him on it, but this wasn't any other day. As far as Max could tell with her limited memories, this was the worst damn day of her life, and she doubted one like this would ever come again. She sighed, relenting, slumping down in the wooden chair opposite to Will's bed, watching him the entire time. Whatever Heather was doing- cleaning the torn skin with alcohol, Max thought- she barely

registered it, far too focused.

A couple bandages later, Heather left Max alone in the infirmary, sensing that she needed time, which the younger girl was incredibly grateful for. She leant forwards, arms rested on her knees, watching Will sleep.

“I’m sorry,” she whispered, despite knowing that he was likely to never hear it. “I’m sorry that I didn’t know. Or.. or that you couldn’t tell me. I knew you got like that sometimes but- I didn’t think you’d actually-” She cut herself off, wiping more tears from her face.

“Fuck,” she breathed, “I’m so sorry.”

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It ‘s dark by the time Will wakes up.

He was groggy and clearly in a lot of pain, groaning when he pushed himself to sit up. Max jumped up instantly, standing by him in seconds. “Hey,” she said softly, “careful, you’ll hurt yourself. Don’t try to move too much.”

Will grimaced, shuffling back as slowly as he could until he could lean against the wall. “Wha-” he cut himself off before he could finish asking, memories of what he’d done hitting him at full force. Max stared at him silently, waiting for him to say something, anything.

He didn't.

"I don't understand," Max said slowly, shaking her head, "you could've talked to me. I could've helped you."

Will visibly winced, diverting his gaze to the floor, rather than having to see her hurt expression. "I know."

"Why?" She asked. "What would you.. Why?" Will swallowed, clearly nervous.

"There wasn't a way out. There's no way out of here, you know that. There's no hope left." His expression softened, looking up at her. "I just want out, Max."

It was in that moment that Max had sworn she'd never seen someone look so sad. He looked a type of tired that she knew sleep wouldn't fix, that nothing, not even her, would likely ever be able to make right. Still, that didn't stop her anger, her hurt- Will was hurting, but as selfish as it may be, she was too.

"So you thought you'd leave me?" She asked quietly, though it resembled more of a statement. Will started to protest instantly.

"Max, it wasn't like that- I wasn't thinking. Everything was just too much, I'm sorry," he said, almost pleading with her.

“How could you be so *stupid* ?” The question itself didn’t sound mean, though Will felt a pang of guilt. It was desperate, and she was clearly talking out of fear, tears starting to make their way down her cheeks. Max was crying. Will had made Max cry.

He’d never seen her cry before.

“Max, please-” he begged, not entirely sure what his point was supposed to be. She shook her head, her breathing more erratic.

“I’m sorry. I- I can’t,” she mumbled, stumbling into the wall on her way out.

Her second panic attack was held behind the infirmary, and this time, Will wasn’t there to calm her down.

-

She comes back an hour or so later, her initial panic replaced by intense, sinking guilt. Will needed her to be there for him, not to yell at him, or let her selfish feelings take over. She could deal with all that another time.

Slumping down on the chair opposite him, they lapsed into silence, Max staring at her hands, Will staring at her. It stayed that way for several minutes, until Max spoke up again.

“I’m sorry.”

Will’s face softened, longing to reach out and comfort her like he’d normally do. “Max, none of this is your fault.”

“But it is!” She exclaimed desperately. “We’ve lost six more runners since Tommy, and I nearly lost you too. I don’t know what I would do if you’d... Will, I *can’t* lose you. I can’t do it.” She paused, exhaling slowly. “I should’ve done something. For them. For *you* .”

“This was on me, Max. This isn’t your fault. Not Tommy, not the other runners, not me. *You* didn’t do this. The creators did,” Will insisted. Max nodded weakly, violent trying to wipe the tears off of her face.

He held his arms out, raising an eyebrow, silently asking if she wanted a hug. In seconds Max was sat on the edge of his bed, arms around his neck, careful not to hurt him any further. He tightened his grip, holding her as close as possible.

“It’s okay,” he whispered, feeling her shoulders shake, her head buried in his shoulder, “I’m not going anywhere. I promise.”

6. Chapter 6

Summary for the Chapter:

hi guys! sorry for not updating in 6 months aha

Max fights tooth and nail for Will to get the job of keeper of the medics.

Heather doesn't care, having hated the responsibility anyway, but Steve and Billy were naturally reluctant. Though the official story went that he'd fallen by accident, Steve was definitely not buying it, and rightfully so- Max had invented it approximately three minutes before Steve had come to talk to them, and Will's ability to lie about it on the spot had been mediocre at best. It ended up taking the entirety of the time that Will took to recover for Max to convince them that he deserved the title, even resorting to threatening to quit.

Mike and Dustin were naturally thrilled to have Will around. When he'd been a runner, he'd spent the majority of his time with Max, running the maze and mapping it when he returned, often eating his dinner whilst working. Now, he was a constant presence, wandering around when no one was in need of immediate medical attention.

Max, on the other hand, was significantly more miserable at the loss of her running partner.

She adapted quickly to running alone, by herself all day with her thoughts, most of which weren't particularly nice. On certain days, the worst ones, she'd contemplate following in Will's footsteps, only to decide against it when she remembered the horror she'd felt when she found him lying on the maze floor. It was much too close to home, the only difference being that Will would never find her body-

no one would. Whether it be grievors or suicide or anything in between, not a single one of the runners shared her route, and they'd never have the time to find her once they noticed she was missing.

She couldn't put Will through that, hell, she'd never put *anyone* through that. She was sure of it.

That being said, she never told Will about those thoughts, though she was certain that he knew. On the worst days- he always seemed to know when those were- he'd sit in silence beside her in the woods, offering a hand to hold, never speaking unless she did so first. It was a small routine that they'd established, and it meant more than Max could ever say.

She wanted to run with Lucas, but he already had a partner, and switching routes wouldn't have been a good idea. Nine months had already passed, nine months of running alone, dutifully mapping the maze, knowing full well how useless the job was. It didn't feel free to her, not like it had in the beginning- it felt like a black hole.

But still, she bid Will goodbye that morning, a small 'see you later' as she left at the crack of dawn, receiving nothing but a mumbled response from the boy, still half asleep. It had become a routine of sorts, never actually verbalising the word 'goodbye', or anything of the sort- Max had stopped saying it after he broke his leg, too scared for it to be the last. So, that was what they'd settled on, 'I'll see you later', something harmless, open-ended, with no chance of it being final.

A promise, in a way.

Things go as smoothly as possible for a couple hours, before Max catches her foot on a rock, stumbling forwards, barely catching herself before her face hit the ground. Her knees scraped against the concrete, blood drawing on impact, a sharp pain spreading throughout her leg. She hissed, turning over to sit up, brushing her hands to rid them of the newly imbedded rocks, bending her left knee to get a closer look.

She rolled her trouser leg up, inspecting the wound, finding nothing more than surface level cuts. It'd sting like a bitch, sure, but it was nothing compared to some other injuries she'd seen. *Nothing on Will.*

What?

The second thought took her aback, a voice popping into her head accompanied by a dull ache in the very centre of her brain. A normal occurrence with a headache, maybe, only it wasn't *her* voice. Somehow, somewhere in her subconscious, she knew that that wasn't her thought, as though there was a disconnect between her and it. As though it didn't belong.

What? Max thought back, thoroughly confused. She remained where she'd fallen, sat dazed on the maze floor, sitting duck if it weren't for the sanctity of the sunlight from above, signalling the time of day. Though she waited for a response, nothing significantly different came through.

Pulling herself to her feet, it did occur to her that it could've just been a fluke, a one-off, or a trick her mind was playing on her. It was the explanation that made the most sense, but she couldn't help but question it, a nagging sensation in the back of her mind that something wasn't quite right.

Though nothing happened on the rest of the run, that didn't stop her from overthinking the entire time. Her thoughts proved distracting, something that never usually happened when she ran, so much that she cut it short. When she returned to the glade, the sun still sat stubbornly in the sky, most

of the others still doing various jobs.

Despite wanting to find her best friend, she stuck to her job, hastily mapping out the glade of a scrap piece of parchment paper so graciously sent up by the creators who'd put them there. Her mapping was careless and she knew it, but she couldn't quite bring herself to care- *something* had happened to her out in that maze, and she couldn't shake it.

Exiting the map room, she headed towards the medhut in search of Will. She had no idea why it was him she needed, but something was urging her to go, telling her that he was the answer, or the key to one anyway.

One look at her best friend told her that her instinct was right.

Entering through the makeshift door, Will looked up at her with an unfamiliar hesitation, almost as though he were scared to talk to her. There was an awkwardness in the air, something stale and unmoving, an unspoken truth that neither would admit to. Max, forever the brave one, spoke up first.

"Did you.." she trailed off, unable to phrase what she wanted to. After all, how do you ask a person if they heard something they

shouldn't have? If she was wrong in her assumption, that he'd felt whatever she had, he'd likely think she was insane. Tell Steve or something, who would stop her from running, or worse, Billy, who'd probably throw her to the grievors in 'self defence'.

She was getting ahead of herself. Clearing her throat, she looked up to watch his reaction- Will, to her relief, gave a small nod.

"I thought something," he said slowly, "you know.. But I don't think *I* thought it." Will paused, shuffling where he stood. "Max, it sounded like you."

She sucked in a breath, thinking back to what she'd heard, a strange, familiar voice, the word 'what?' sticking out in her mind. "What did I say?"

"You said something about having nothing on me?" Will sounded mildly confused at that, though Max understood perfectly. She laughed awkwardly- that wasn't exactly the best thing to admit to thinking.

"Uh- yeah. I tripped and grazed my knees," she admitted, not missing the strange look on Will's face when he let his guard down. They remained in silence for a matter of minutes, before realisation dawned on Max.

"Holy shit. Will, can we.." she trailed off, frowning at him, both excited and nervous-looking, "can we hear each other's thoughts?"

“But how is that even possible?” He wasn’t denying it, but he couldn’t quite believe it either. This wasn’t anything either of them could quite comprehend- mind reading? Telepathy?

“How is this *maze* possible, Will?” She retorted, raising an eyebrow. It wasn’t entirely clear whether she was convincing him, or convincing herself, but still, she had a point. Everything around them was mildly unbelievable- the griever, the maze, the box. None of it made total sense.

“Okay, well try it again,” Will argued, crossing his arms. Max huffed in frustration, running a hand through her hair.

“Well what do you want me to say?” She asked, watching the other intently. He shrugged, making it clear that he wasn’t going to help. Max huffed again.

“Fine, whatever,” she grumbled, crossing her arms to mimic him. She didn’t even know how she’d done it the first time, damnit.

This is fucking stupid.

No response.

This isn’t going to work.

No response.

Bullshit. Bullshit. Bullshit. Bullshit-

“Can you try a little harder?” Will commented, growing unusually impatient. Max flipped him off.

Why don't you try this, see how you like it, you little-

Will's head snapped up, frowning at her, mouth forming an o-shape. “What did you just think?” He asked cautiously, excitement seeping into his tone. Max hesitated.

“Why don't you try this-”

“-See how you like it,” Will finished for her, expression morphing into one of shock. Max's eyebrows furrowed.

“This is fucking weird,” she muttered, shaking her head. “This is what the fuck.” A pause. “We can't tell anyone about this, and you know it.” *Especially not Billy*, a thought that she didn't voice, and dearly hoped that Will didn't hear either. What he'd do, she didn't know, but *God* she didn't want to be around for it.

Will nodded. “Okay. Just between us.”

Author's Note:

Thank you so much for reading, this was so fun to

write.

For anyone that came from my other work, I haven't abandoned it. I took a break because it was stressing me out, but there should be a new chapter shortly. As for this fic, I've written most of it already!

As always, please feel free to leave kudos or comments if you have the time! They're greatly appreciated, and they really make my day. Constructive criticism is welcome too. :)